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Allyson Fleming
University of Victoria

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The Perils and Promise of Personalized Learning

Allyson Fleming
University of Victoria

Abstract

In this article I explore the concept of personalized learning, a relatively new concept being promoted by the British Columbia (BC) Ministry of Education as the “new” approach to effective learning through the lens of a practicing professional. I begin by tracing my own emerging understanding of personalized learning as a discourse in BC education and then follow this with a discussion about the dominance of neoliberalism as an ideological frame for thinking about education and schooling. In particular, I consider how the role of the teacher shifts from professional to functionary, and how this shift is reified through two distinct BC educational policy initiatives that promote technology as the great educational equalizer. I conclude by suggesting that rather than fixing schools, teachers and reformers should direct their efforts to taking up the potentiality inherent in these competing discourses.

What is personalized learning, and how will it affect me as a teacher? This paper offers an analysis and critique of the newly proposed “Personalized learning” policy of the Ministry of Education in British Columbia (BC) and traces its neoliberal ideology as evidenced in two BC Policy documents. I begin by exploring how I became aware of the neoliberal discourses prevalent in education, including the catalyzing effect of a research presentation I attended in 2009 and through to my more recent analysis of the BC government’s personalized learning policy framework – including the changing role of technology in education. The article ends with a discussion about how to re-purpose educational discourses in ways that might effectively put children back at the center of our thinking as educational advocates, teachers and policy makers.

A Need for Change in BC’s Schools

As a high school teacher, I have been both heartened and skeptically leery of the changes proposed through the adoption of the British Columbia Ministry of Education plan for personalized learning. For years I have bemoaned the irrelevance of existing curricula and students’ growing lack of engagement with the materials, methods and structures that constitute high school education. From my observations and experience, there appears to have been a shift in student thinking about formal education – away from the ideas of schools as places of “learning” towards the notion that course work has no real bearing on their future beyond what its mastery can provide them in the way of acceptance to colleges or universities. In other words, for many students, high school is something to be “got through” in order to get “somewhere else”. Considering that students spend approximately 13 of their first 20 years of life in formal schooling, the idea that the last 5 or 6 years of their experience is for some, conceptualised, as an exercise in “hoop jumping” is quite depressing. Nowhere except for those incarcerated in prison, is this enforced, routinised, “putting in time” existence allowed, even sanctioned, by society.

Upon reflection, this shift may not be solely in students’ thinking about education, but in

students' and society's willingness to question aloud the historically sacrosanct concept of formal education as the appropriate vehicle for serving the common good. It is this shift in perception that destabilizes the foundation upon which schools, and to a certain extent, the identity of educators has been built. No longer is formal schooling viewed as an inviolable institution – a “sacred cow” off limits for public scrutiny and critique. Governments and pundits worldwide have called for a shift in education as conceived and delivered to become more responsive to the needs of students and society and have advocated changes that move beyond the reform paradigms of the past to a revolutionary re-visioning of how we conceive of education and schooling (Innovation Unit UK, 2011; Robinson, 2006). Personalized learning as proposed by the BC government has the potential to transform both our understanding of and relationship to schooling and education, as well as to completely reconfigure our identity as educators. As this paper will discuss, this development is both welcomed and feared.

The Hopes (and Fears) of Revolution

A presentation at ICSEI (International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement) 2009 in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, by Valerie Hannon from the Innovation Unit UK was the first I had heard of the ideas of “21st century learning” – or, “personalized” learning. As we listened to the presentation, a colleague leaned over and whispered excitedly in my ear, “*This* is what we’ve been waiting for”. I nodded, but while my head was whirring with the possibilities, alarm bells were ringing as I quickly tried to assimilate how the adoption of these ideas might play out in a province where the relationship between the teachers’ union and government is fraught with distrust, acrimony, and bitter labour disputes. The hope and excitement for an educational revolution was tempered by a sobering analysis of what systemic change might mean for me as a teacher. What role would my colleagues and I play in this new system? What might our future as educators look like if the ideas proposed were adopted? How might this “revolution” impact our identities as education professionals? What were the details? Changes to the education system in BC were mere murmurs back in 2009; in 2011 with the advent of the BC Education Plan, those murmurs have been amplified and articulated. Changes are coming – a transformation of the education system is on the way. What remains to be seen is how the plan will play out and how significantly it will change our roles as educators.

Neoliberalism – Education, Accountability and the De-professionalization of Teachers

What is of utmost importance here is not to question whether changes to our education system were needed – that much is a given. Of utmost importance is an examination of the ideological framework informing this shift away from schooling and education as a communal activity towards personalized learning with its concomitant emphasis on tailoring education to meet students’ individual interests, resulting in individual student success – a concept firmly rooted in neoliberal ideology – or is it?

Daniel (2007) posited that:

The neo-liberal vision perceives a close relationship between education and the economy within a larger framework of global competition. This relationship influences the drive to higher educational standards and increased student testing as a preparation for entry into the marketplace. The neo-liberal perspective draws on the language of liberty, free

choice, and individualism (p. 14).

According to Hursh (2005), in neoliberal ideology the goals of the economy supersede the needs of individuals in society, and thus, “education becomes less concerned with developing the well-rounded liberally educated person and more concerned with developing the skills required for a person to become an economically productive member of society” (p. 5), and that as a result, “...neo-liberal...politicians have reshaped educational policy around the ideology that schools need to incorporate markets, competition, and choice in order to prepare students for the global economy” (p. 13). Burbules and Torres (2000) suggested that the

economic effects of globalization tend to...promot[e] market approaches to school choice...; rational management of school organizations; performance assessment (testing); and deregulation in order to encourage new providers (including online providers) of educational services. (p. 13)

Hursh (2005) postulated that neo-liberal governments’ desire to get out of the business of governing and their goal to reduce the size of government overall has resulted in “a system in which [they] can govern schools from afar through policies promoting testing, accountability, and choice” (p. 6). According to Codd (2005), this has resulted in an education system unlike any seen in past generations in that:

New forms of control and accountability have emerged informed by theories of economic rationalism and based upon a culture of mistrust...educational accountability has shifted away from a focus on inputs and process and onto a focus on outcomes and products...Education is reduced to a commodity...one of preparing people for the job market. (pp. 194, 196)

Codd (2005) averred that neoliberal educational reform has resulted in education being denigrated to the point where “knowledge, experience, understanding, and especially imagination, are recognized only if they can be reduced to something observable, or to some performance outcome that can be specified in advance of the educational moment” (p. 201). As a result, Codd (2005) determined that “[the] emphasis on efficiency and external accountability treats teachers as functionaries rather than professionals and thereby diminishes their autonomy and commitment to the values and principles of education” (p. 201).

Teachers as Professionals or Functionaries?

The neoliberal conception of teachers as “functionaries rather than professionals” places educators in a difficult position. As noted by Hargreaves and Lo (2000),

Of all the jobs that are professions or aspire to be so, teaching is the only one that is...charged with the formidable task of creating the human skills and capacities that will enable societies to survive and succeed in the age of information...It is teachers, more than anybody, who are expected to build learning communities, create the knowledge society and develop the capacities for innovation, flexibility and commitment to change that are essential to economic prosperity in the twenty-first century” (p. 168).

Hargreaves and Lo (2000) went on to note that although it appears that the expectations placed on teachers continue to grow, when it comes to funding cuts, education is generally at the top of the list. In other words, “[t]eachers are caught in a dilemma. They are expected to be leading catalysts of the informational society, yet they are also one of its prime casualties” (p. 168).

By diminishing the role of teachers to that of functionaries, or service providers – or as in the case of the BC Education Plan – “guides or coaches”, neoliberalism calls into question the

morally based values orientation that most educators see as equal to, if not more important than the knowledge base that they bring to their role in schools. From an economic rationalist perspective, service providers simply fulfill a role within the market relationship. Should the service provider fail to meet the obligations of the contractual relationship, the market would dictate they be replaced by a more adequate, cost effective entity capable of delivering the required outcomes. While this checks and balances notion is absolutely critical within economic relationships, it is anathema to the social humanist context within which educators and students work.

It does not require a huge leap in logic to presume that if teachers and educators are simply service providers then they are also motivated by the market driven ideology which assumes that their primary motivation is self-interest, not necessarily the interests of those whom they are contracted to – in this case, parents, students and society (Codd, 2005). Running contrary to that notion however, is the vision alluded to by Hargreaves and Lo (2000) and Codd (2005) who noted, “teachers who are fully professional... embody fundamental educational values... manifested not in a narrow set of technical competencies, not in a job description or an employment contract, but in personal initiative, self-knowledge and professional autonomy” (p. 202). This flies in stark contrast to the view held by neoliberal governments who see teachers as “little more than skilled technicians... who... have specified competencies, [are] extrinsically motivated within a contractual relationship, and [who] produce what the performance indicators can measure” (Codd, 2005, p. 202).

Kumashiro (2010) illustrated how this perception of teacher as technician or service provider – contracted to perform a service and thus replaceable, has resulted in the proliferation of “fast tracked” teacher certification programs in the United States (p. 60) where the emphasis is on hiring “teachers” based on “individual performance... attributed to knowing what to teach (versus how to teach)” thus, “[t]raditional teacher preparation, within this logic, cannot be the solution to educational disparities” (p. 60).

As it would appear that the qualities attributed to “professional” educators – those who “embody fundamental educational values...” (Codd, 2005, p. 202) are of little significance in a solely outcomes based system, it is not surprising that governments have “turned its attention to removing “barriers” to teacher recruitment and opening the door to alternative routes to certification, particularly as the definition of teacher quality and teacher qualification became less linked to preparation, and more linked to subject matter competency” (Kumashiro, 2010, p. 61). According to Imig, Wiseman, and Imig (2011), “many of the reform efforts are sponsored by powerful reform organizations determined to transform teaching by changing the way that teachers are recruited, prepared, placed, supported, evaluated and compensated”(p. 400). The authors (2011) described recent efforts (“The Growing Education Achievement Training Academies for Teachers and Principals Act, 2011”) by both Republican and Democratic senators that seek to fund training programs for educators that operate *outside* of university preparedness programmes (p. 400).

So, in light of what appears to be a move on the part of the neoliberal vanguard to deprofessionalize teachers – to have individuals engage in a marketized relationship with institutions such as education, the question becomes, what might the adoption of the BC Education Plan mean for the professional identity of current and future teachers in the province of British Columbia?

The Premier's Technology Council and the "Shifting" Role of the Teacher

In December 2010 a report was released by the Premier's Technology Council (PTC) entitled *A Vision for 21st Century Education*. Inside, the authors put forth a plan for an "ideal" education system in British Columbia. The authors cautioned that the ideas they were putting forth were practicable if implemented on a "blank slate". In other words, they were "not recommending that the existing system be torn apart but [instead] it must transform if it is to prepare students to be successful in our rapidly changing world" (PTC, 2010, p. 4). The document goes on to highlight the transformations in the education system necessary to meet the needs of our "rapidly changing world" that they describe as the "knowledge-based society". Within the first few paragraphs of the document, the "knowledge-based society" is presented alongside the "knowledge-based economy" and the terms are then used almost synonymously and interchangeably throughout the rest of the paper. In fact, this document speaks specifically to the need for an education system that prepares students and society to compete in the global marketplace. As the system is transformed so too are the roles of educational stakeholders, including teachers, who become guides:

It is no longer a requirement for the teacher to know more information than the student on every topic...As a learning coach or coordinator the teacher can move from being the primary source of information and direction to acting as a co-ordinator of purposeful activity that matches student learning needs with available resources, thereby promoting self-directed learning behaviour. For the teacher this will require a focus on participation and negotiation rather than direction and instruction. (p. 26)

As a teacher, I am hard pressed to consider my eight years of post-secondary education as preparing me to become a "learning coach" or "coordinator" of learning. Such terminology and the concomitant repositioning of educators as guides does little to assuage any fears that the conception of teachers as professionals – akin in status to lawyers and doctors—is on its way out, to be reconceptualised as technical "facilitators" of learning.

The BC Education Plan

In October 2011, the BC government released its *Education Plan*, highlighting forthcoming changes to public education to meet the needs of the 21st century learner, society, and the knowledge economy. The document is essentially a framework – ostensibly to be interpreted and implemented at the district level rather than delivered as a prescriptive missive from the educational powers in Victoria. This does not appear to be a policy "floated out" by the government to assess public support or lack thereof. In all its vagueness and lack of detail, this is the blueprint for educational change in British Columbia. Although the government is soliciting input from students, parents, the public and educators via their website, it makes clear a transformed education system is on the horizon. How the plan will be interpreted and implemented across the diverse geographic and demographic landscape of British Columbia will be telling as to whether the plan can create a more *equitable* educational environment for all BC students or whether it will be simply another attempt at promoting educational *equality*. If, as it appears "equality" will be defined as increased access to technological tools to level the playing field – so that all students have equal access to a multitude of resources, then in essence, the role of the teacher across jurisdictions will be reduced to facilitating student learning. In other words, the teacher no longer "directs" or "catalyses" learning; instead, the teacher becomes another *tool*

in the students' personalised tool boxes in order to leverage learning. However, teachers understand that *equality* and *equity* are not synonymous: *equal* technological access may enhance students' opportunities, but a teacher is critical to recognizing that the systemic barriers many students face will not be erased through *equality* measures, and thus, as professionals, they strive to provide an *equitable* educational environment for all students.

The new roles and tasks educators are to perform are not detailed in the *BC Education Plan* – the website notes that the government will be consulting with its education partners over the next months to iron out the specifics. What is known from the plan is that there will be increased flexibility in the assessment of student work based on fewer but more indepth learning outcomes, and that teachers – through technology – will have access to more indepth student information in order to both help tailor their individual learning plans and to identify and resolve student learning problems sooner. Additionally, it appears that teacher professional development will become more prescribed and less teacher-driven; its rationale is that it will increase accountability to society for the dollars spent. While many might argue that what currently passes for “professional development” is pedagogically questionable at best, the prescriptive tone set forth in the *Education Plan* infers that teachers are not professional enough to engage in authentic self-directed professional development aimed at improving both teaching and learning. Another potential blow to the the perception and conception of teachers as professionals.

Education: The Great Equalizer?

According to Horace Mann (1848), “education ...beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery”. A liberal arts education was believed to be the best, broadly configured mode of transmission in order to create a citizenry who could contribute to the betterment of society - with all of the inherent rights and responsibilities that democratic citizenship affords. Students would be inculcated with the knowledge, skills, values, morals and ethical attributes valued by the society in order to serve the common good. They were socialized into society through the structures of schooling, the content of the curriculum, and the social nature of learning.

This historical notion and widely accepted truth of the potential for education to transform society and bring about equality has been scrutinized by critical education theorists (e.g. Ball, 2006; Kumashiro, 2009) and found wanting in light of the inherent inequality apparent in the workings of capitalist economic systems. Instead these theorists have argued, education has become not a tool for equality and the common good, but a tool to maintain the hierarchical status quo of society where there are natural winners and losers. As Hursh (2005) noted, the triumph of the capitalist economic paradigm has “redefine[d] the relationship between the individual and society” where “inequality is a result of individuals' inadequacy, which is to be remedied...by requiring individuals to strive to become productive members of the workforce” (p. 4). One might argue that the heavy emphasis on the narrowing and standardization of curriculum and assessment in order to measure and compare student achievement necessarily creates a competitive paradigm mirroring the capitalist marketplace where students will eventually take up their place. In the *BC Education Plan* this is exemplified through the proposed adoption of fewer learning outcomes and yet more rigorous assessment. Yet there is a significant difference between education reforms instituted previously and those that are being proposed in the current plan. One might call these new changes “revolutionary” based as they are in a reconfiguration of both educational structures and roles.

The above makes clear that the move towards a “knowledge-based society” has triggered a shift in the way we conceive of the purpose and structure of schooling. Personalized learning advocates argue that students pursue knowledge based on their own interests and aptitudes. This would seem to suggest that the curriculum implementation will now be approached as more “bottom up” than “top down” – although constrained by acceptable objectives and pre-determined outcomes. The emphasis is not on student accumulation and regurgitation of facts and bits of information doled out by the teacher, but on a synthesis of information presented – more problem-based learning (a la Freire) – where what one does with the information is more important than having the information at one’s recall. This shift is mind-blowing. The potential for students to make real connections and thus give meaning to their learning has increased exponentially as a result of placing more of an emphasis on self-directed learning. But there’s a problem.

Technology: The New Equalizer?

If education as historically conceived, has failed as the great equalizer – we still have poverty, we still have all of the social ills education should have eliminated, what can bridge that gap? Has education failed, or have the structures upon which education has been built failed? All things being equal, there should not be disparities in the provision or quality of education delivered and consumed province wide. But in a province as geographically and demographically diverse as British Columbia, all things are not equal. Rural communities are sometimes underserved by education. Teacher retention is difficult in small remote communities. Access to educational opportunities is sometimes limited by geography or perhaps socioeconomic status. There are some bad teachers. There is disparity in content knowledge amongst teachers making for an uneven delivery of the curriculum. There is disparity in the quality and quantity of appropriate resources. All of these factors weigh heavily on a system that purports to be the great equalizer. So, given the factors that might militate against student success, what measures might we adopt to once again, level the playing field? What objective, rational, value neutral tools might we use to equalize educational opportunity? According to the Premier’s Technology Council and the *BC Education Plan*, the answer is technology. If we provide students, families and educators with greater access to technology, it appears we should be able to iron out the wrinkles of disparity in the educational fabric. Once all students have access to the same information as every other student in the province, their ability to succeed will be greatly enhanced by eliminating the factors working against student success. But there is a problem. How do we pay for more technology in education when the last decade has seen cut upon cut to the education budget? The answer may be in the Plan:

Boards of education will also have more flexibility to organize classes and other learning experiences so they can better direct resources to support student learning...Students will continue to create blended learning opportunities through online learning and class-based environments. Enrolment in online courses has grown by more than 500% in the last five years. (BC Education Plan, 2011, p. 6)

In 2001, the BC government switched from block funding for education to a per-pupil funding formula. As school districts shrink or grow, gain or lose students, so too does their funding. The per-pupil funding is meant to cover all district expenses, including those not directly related to student learning – salaries, carbon offsets, student transportation costs and skyrocketing BC Hydro rates are all borne by districts who must choose how to allocate their

share of the provincial pie. How do districts, faced with the challenge of meeting these costs now fund huge increases in school-based infrastructure through the implementation of more technology? Unless the province decides to untie the purse strings and pour money into the system, the answer might be found in the “flexibility” offered to school boards described above. With a 500% increase in enrolment in online courses since 2006, the potential savings in moving to more online offerings may be tempting for some cash-strapped districts (BC Education Plan, 2011, p. 6). Online learning does not require the traditional one teacher per 30 students (or so) ratio nominally associated with face-to-face learning. Savings on teacher salaries could go a long way towards funding increased technology while still providing *equal* educational opportunities to all students through online offerings. Unless of course, school districts should decide that there is something fundamentally imperative in face-to-face learning that cannot be replicated in an online student-teacher relationship – such as a face-to-face student-teacher relationship. But then again, if teachers are simply service providers, subject experts, or technicians, then the absence of the social relationship exemplifying the underlying moral purpose of education and evident in the daily interactions between teacher and student should not give districts pause in considering the cost savings in moving towards more online offerings. Of course, this is just musing. Perhaps the government has a huge financial surplus that they intend to inject into the education system. Perhaps they have a “deal” with corporate sponsors such as Telus and Cisco Systems to supply hardware, software and support in exchange for some currently intangible trade-off. Only the future will tell.

How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love “The Plan”

At the outset of this paper I alluded to both my skepticism and my hope upon hearing about the potential for a 21st century education system. My natural inclination to distrust anything put forth by this government is based in my experiences as a teacher in this province during the bitterly acrimonious labour disputes through the last decade. The offloading of responsibility for the delivery and maintenance of public services to the private sector, the funding cuts to social services, the apparent disregard for the will of the people (as evidenced by the recent HST debate in BC) and the “we know best” arrogance that have earmarked the years since 2001 have, for many teachers, coalesced into something bordering on an obsessive hatred of all things BC Liberal. This distrust, cynicism and suspicion make it really difficult to find the merit in the BC Education Plan even though many elements are exactly in line with my own thinking around the problems in British Columbia’s education system. But how to forego the hatred and embrace the plan?

As alluded to early on in this paper, the roots of personalised learning seem firmly embedded in neoliberal ideology especially considering the emphasis on the individualization and personalization of learning as the locus of success. Yet at the outset, I also championed the idea of a more relevant education. This collision of contradictory beliefs caused me great consternation. I felt that in accepting the BC Education Plan as a good thing, I had in essence “drunk the Kool-Aid” – becoming a minion of neoliberal ideology. How to resolve this contradiction? Mudge (2008) provided the key: she described neoliberalism as “a *sui generis* ideological system born of historical processes of struggle and collaboration...” (p. 704). In other words, it is a unique, peculiar ideology, a “one-off”, according to the Merriam Webster dictionary, and one that acts as a “hybrid” that “reaches well beyond nationally bound politics and does not mesh neatly with right-left distinctions...” (Mudge, 2008, p. 721).

Perhaps this was the source of my conflict – neoliberalism is a *pragmatic* ideology: it can be taken up by parties of both the right and the left, as elements of these traditional political binaries can be simultaneously articulated through policy as meeting “collective interest [through] individualistic terms” (Mudge, 2008, p. 721). So it would appear that I can be *pragmatic* and choose to accept personalised learning as articulated in the BC Education Plan because in part, it addresses the problems I have identified and experienced with the current education system. According to Pykett (2009),

In examining the convergence and divergence of core concepts of the person and of freedom within personalization as a contemporary discourse circulating the education policy arena, it can be shown how personalization means different things to different people at the same time. An emphasis on its contemporaneous discursive agency opens up a seemingly unlikely confluence of personalization denounced as a linear, right-wing, neo-liberal project and the ‘progressive’ philosophies of the de-schoolers of the late 1960s and 1970s. (p. 378)

This seeming tension between those who see personalized learning as bound in neoliberal ideology and those who see it as an emancipatory practice towards making education meaningful for students is a perfect example of this dichotomy as exemplified by my feelings towards the BC Education Plan:

For some proponents of personalization, the idea denotes a modern notion of educational choice, flexibility, parental control and independence from the state. For other, ‘progressive’ educators, commonly regarded to be from a more left political tradition, it denotes an education which values personal differences, learner control and democratic schools, and is opposed to rigid national testing. In this latter sense, the idea of the school is seen as a depersonalizing environment in which children and young people must conform to social (and nationally tested) norms which pay little regard to people as individuals with different needs and interests. (Pykett, 2009, p. 378-379)

So, ultimately, perhaps what is needed is not a *sui generis* education system - a new, hybrid form of education that creates and draws from the discourses and ideologies of progressives and neoliberals alike, as does the BC Education Plan. Perhaps what is needed is a *sui generis* re-formation or re-creation of society. Maybe we need to turn this scenario on its head. Perhaps we should stop for a minute and consider the idea that schools are in essence microcosms of society. Perhaps we should question the criticisms that schools are not meeting the needs of society and instead turn the spotlight on the failures of society to live up to the expectations of its children. Perhaps if we start framing the problems as “what is wrong with society” instead of “what is wrong with schools”, we might discover that for too long we have avoided critiquing the assumptions we hold about our place in the world, our superiority over nature and “other” and the notion that our insatiable consumption will not have consequences. Perhaps if we start reframing our relationship to each other and to the world as one of interdependence and to start to act towards each other with what Starratt (1991) identifies as the “ethic of care”, we may find that a new form of education system evolves. An education system that is based not in the market ideologies of competition and unfettered capitalism, nor in the de-schooling movements of yesteryear; not one based solely in the theoretical, but one based on praxis and what it means to reflect and act on the problems generated through and impacting on the interrelated and interdependence of all humans and our environment. One based in notions of environmental and social sustainability, one that seeks to solve problems not of self-importance, but of global importance, that has as the one and only learning outcome - our common fate: an education

system that Hargreaves and Fink (2006) likened to an eco-system – one that “value[s] community interests over self-interest, diversity over sameness, and connectedness over individualism...[consisting of]...interconnections and interrelationships” (p. 224). Perhaps articulation of such a vision might result in education and society that are truly in accord with upholding, nurturing, and extolling the “common” good. This is a plan to genuinely love.

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